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President: Mr. Kutesa ..... (Uganda)

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Agenda item 116 (*continued*)

Follow-up to the commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade

Commemorative meeting of the General Assembly on the occasion of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade

The President: Members will recall that the General Assembly held the debate on this agenda item and adopted resolution 69/19, entitled "Permanent memorial to and remembrance of the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade", at its 58th plenary meeting, on 21 November 2014.

Today, as we commemorate the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, we focus on women and slavery and the hardships borne by enslaved women. We also pay tribute to those women and others who fought for the abolition of slavery and succeeded in passing on the rich heritage of their ancestral African cultures.

For black men and women alike, slavery was a devastating experience. They were torn from their birthplace, families and communities, forced to perform gruelling labour, subjected to mental and physical degradation and denied their most basic human rights. Enslaved men and women were brutalized, arbitrarily separated from loved ones and treated as chattel property.

History tells us that despite those common factors, the circumstances of slavery were different for black women and black men. The plight of female slaves was highlighted by Deborah Gray White, who wrote in her landmark work, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, that a slave woman was black in a white society, a slave in a free society and a woman in a society ruled by men. Enslaved women worked in the fields alongside the men, did household chores and were mothers to their own children as well as surrogates to the children of the masters. They also suffered the indignity of sexual exploitation at the hands of overseers and plantation owners.

When it came to resistance, enslaved women also played an important role. As often as they could, black women, just like black men, rebelled against the inhumanities of slave owners. Enslaved women learned to rely heavily on each other and today, the descendants of those brave women are the bedrock of the culture of the African diaspora and continue to hold together their homes, extended families and communities.

Despite the oppression of slavery, enslaved women brought with them the creativity and ingenuity of their ancestors. We can take pride in the fact that many African traditions survived the horrors of the Middle Passage. Many here in the Hall joined us outside earlier for the unveiling of the Permanent Memorial to honour the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. The significance of Rodney Leon's *Ark of Return* is that it ensures that we will never forget the injustices of slavery. At the same time it inspires hope.

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While we reflect on the past and the progress made, including the abolition of slavery and the slave trade, we must also acknowledge that slavery continues in many forms and manifestations. It is deplorable that even today, many innocent women and young girls are still held in bondage and are denied their freedoms and rights to dignified lives, due to human trafficking and sexual exploitation. In addition, many children continue to be held in servitude as child labourers. We must intensify our collective efforts in combating and eliminating such abuses.

Our commitment to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards should be translated into respect for all of humanity.

I now give the floor to His Excellency Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

The Secretary-General: It is an honour to be with all present here to commemorate the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In thanking the President of the General Assembly, I also welcome Ms. Sylviane Diouf. I commend her for her tireless work in bringing home the true horrors and suffering brought about by that diabolical trade, through her award-winning books, publications and documentaries.

This Day allows us to remember 15 million men, women and children who were heartlessly torn from their homeland on the African continent and forced to cross the Atlantic in slave ships and who then suffered or died under an inconceivably brutal system of slavery in the Americas.

The theme for this year's commemoration is "Women and slavery". It allows us to pay special tribute to the millions of women who endured the harsh conditions of slavery, as well as additional sexual exploitation because of their gender. This year is particularly meaningful as we honour the victims of slavery with a permanent memorial, entitled *Ark of Return* — beautifully designed by Mr. Rodney Leon — which we have just unveiled on the visitor's plaza outside this Hall. It will stand as an enduring acknowledgement to the people of African descent who perished or suffered as slaves. It also honours the huge numbers of people purchased by the slave traders who never even survived the passage across the Atlantic. *The Ark of Return* will serve as an educational tool for teaching future generations about the transatlantic slave trade through the United Nations "Remember slavery" programme.

Around the world, United Nations information centres are marking this day with educational activities to help raise awareness about the dangers posed by racism and prejudice. Raising awareness of those issues is just the first step. We encourage Member States to introduce lessons into school curricula on the causes, consequences and lessons of the transatlantic slave trade. The United Nations Department of Public Information and UNESCO, through its Slave Route Project, are ready to assist Member States to achieve that end.

Tragically, contemporary forms of slavery persist in the form of forced labour, trafficking, sexual exploitation or captivity in slavery-like conditions. I call on all Member States to act without fear or favour against all modern manifestations of slavery whenever and wherever they occur.

Finally, I would like to commend the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for continuing to take the lead in helping to ensure that the rights of all people of African descent are protected and fulfilled. This was called for by the General Assembly, which proclaimed 2015 to 2024 as the International Decade for People of African Descent. The commitment to this International Decade and the unveiling of the Permanent Memorial are tangible signs of the international community's commitment to work towards eliminating racism. They are also a sign of our commitment to ensure that the twenty-first century affords people everywhere the right to live in peace, freedom and dignity.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank the Secretary-General for his statement.

Before proceeding further, I should like to consult members on inviting Ms. Sylviane Diouf, Curator of Digital Collections at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of the New York Public Library, to make a keynote statement.

May I take it that it is the wish of the General Assembly, without setting a precedent, to invite Ms. Sylviane Diouf to make a keynote statement at this commemorative meeting?

It was so decided.

The President: I now give the floor to Ms. Diouf.

Ms. Diouf (New York Public Library): It is a great honour to be here today as we commemorate the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, whose memory has been so movingly captured and rendered by architect Rodney Leon.

This year's theme, "Women and slavery", comes fittingly on the heels of International Women's Day and Women's History Month. This theme reminds us that no history, no present and no future can be written without recognizing the vital role of women, which unfortunately is too often obscured, glossed over, forgotten or even denied. So I am particularly pleased to be helping to break the silence that surrounds the women who were not simply the victims of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery but were also immense contributors to the creation of a new world.

But first let us remember that, between the early 1500s and 1867, as many captives crossed the Atlantic Ocean as were forced out of Africa by all the other slave trades combined from the years 500 to 1900. The transatlantic slave trade was the most massive forced migration in history. As a result, from 1492 to 1820, 80 per cent of the people who arrived in the Americas were Africans. Only 20 per cent were Europeans. Africans landed in every country, from Argentina to Bolivia, from every Caribbean island to Honduras and North America. The Africans' skills, knowledge and work transformed the land. They mined and cultivated the riches of the continent. They built cities and towns and fought for the freedom and independence of the countries that enslaved them, all the while developing new cultures, new languages, new religions, new peoples.

Females represented 30 per cent of the people who survived the Middle Passage. We know that most deported Africans were between the ages of 15 and 30. What that means is that the majority of the women who boarded the slave ships were married and had children. That was the case for many men, too. Those women were not only daughters and sisters, then, but they were also wives and mothers who left husbands and young children behind or saw them embark on another ship. The sheer agony of being so brutally separated from the family that loved them, uprooted from their community forever, can never be adequately described, and was often expressed without words. On the slave ships, one surgeon explained,

> "Men and women showed signs of extreme distress and despair, from a feeling of being torn from their friends and connections. They were often heard in the night making a howling, melancholy noise expressive of extreme anguish. It was because they had dreamed that they were in their own country again, and finding themselves when awake in the hold of a slave ship. This exquisite sensibility was particularly observable among the women, many of whom, on such occasions, were found in hysteric fits".

The women who survived the ordeal represented 80 per cent of all the women who landed in the Americas before 1820. Their presence had a considerable impact on the formation of the continent. They were central to the demographic, social and cultural development of the Western hemisphere. They carried with them their knowledge of medicinal plans and various crops, their skills at gardening and midwifery, their cuisines, their songs, their dances, their stories and their gender traditions, values, cultures and religious practices. Although their mortality rates were high and their fertility rates were low, they were the women who brought to the world the first generations of Americans.

But as slaves and as women, they and their daughters and granddaughters bore the brunt of oppression. Studies have shown that women were more likely to be subjected to excessive physical abuse than men. They were more vulnerable and less likely to respond with force. As Frederick Douglass wrote, "He is whipped oftenest who is whipped easiest". Women, like men, were stripped naked, whipped and humiliated in front of their children and the larger community. But slavery's subjection took on an added dimension where women were concerned. They were victims of sexual abuse, from harassment to forced prostitution and from forced breeding to rape — rape by sailors on the slave ships and by overseers, slaveholders and their sons in the Americas was a persistent threat for all and a horrific reality for many. Used as it continues to be used today, as a weapon of terror, rape was meant to demean and assert power not only over the women but also their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons, who were reminded daily that they were considered to be less than men, since they could not protect their womenfolk.

Breeding under compulsion or for incentives was another appalling feature of the gender-based violence and exploitation that women had to endure. Overall, the sexual abuse of women was part of a larger attempt to demoralize and subdue the entire community. Slavery

did not recognize the sanctity of marriage. Couples and families could be broken up at any time without warning. Except on large plantations, it was common for husbands and wives not to reside in the same place, and sometimes not even in the same area, following sales or the owners' relocation. It was thus a reality that despite men's often incredibly heroic efforts to visit and support their families, women were largely forced to raise their children on their own for as long as they could, since they lived under the constant threat of sale — the sale of their children or themselves.

But amid it all, women fought back in a multitude of ways. Their insolence was noted throughout the Americas. Verbal confrontations, gestures, attitudes, looks and facial expressions that showed a lack of respect and challenged authority were deemed to be mostly women's weapons. Such overt manifestations of hostility and insubordination could be brutally punished. It was often women who were the poisoners of animals and people, spreading terror among slaveholders, who feared for their lives and those of their families, and shrinking their holdings of humans and beasts. Rejecting the owners' management of their fertility, mothers and midwives were abortionists and perpetrators of infanticide who refused to bring children into a miserable world and increase slaveholders' fortunes.

Even if they did it less frequently than men, women ran away to cities and free territories, or stayed on their own or with their families in small and large Maroon communities throughout the western hemisphere. In the United States there were women and their children who lived in caves they had dug seven feet underground. Some gave birth there and remained safely hidden for years. During insurrections, women fed the fighters, transported ammunition, acted as spies and tended to the wounded. Some took up arms and fought, sometimes disguised as men. Others used their gender as a weapon. In the uprising and revolution in Saint-Domingue, for example, some women exchanged sexual favours with French soldiers for bullets and gunpowder.

Women were hanged, whipped to death, burned alive, mauled by dogs or shot for marronage, assault, arson, poisoning and rebellion. But one of the most enduring aspects of women's resistance was the preservation and passing on of culture. Because of the widespread dislocation of families, while mothers were not the only social and cultural nurturers of 15 generations of enslaved men and women in the Atlantic world, too often they were the main ones. Given the circumstances, they were the predominant providers to their children of the inner strength and coping mechanisms that enabled them to survive, live, love, hope, create and form strong, resourcesful communities.

Through oral traditions, skills, deeds, example and sheer determination, women largely kept the African diaspora in the Atlantic world together. They were instrumental in creating and transmitting the dynamic and vibrant cultures we know as African-American, Gullah Geechee, Caribbean, Bushinengue, Afro-Peruviana, Afro-Brasileira, Creole and Antillaise. The women's bravery and stamina in a world that tried to degrade them as human beings, as Africans and as women is an extraordinarily inspiring example for all times and all places. In an evil system of terror, a racist, sexist and patriarchal environment, women found ways. They taught, protected, nurtured, challenged and fought.

The women's struggles alongside the men did not end with the abolition of the slave trade and slavery. As the need for an international decade for people of African descent abundantly shows, their 200 million descendants in the Americas still face daunting obstacles — individual and institutional racism, racial and gender marginalization and discrimination, poverty, de facto segregation and denial of basic rights. Breaking the silence and confronting those issues, including modern slavery and sexual slavery, that primarily victimize girls and women, are our responsibility today, so that the next generations will not have to fight the same battles. As a historian of the slave trade and slavery, I have learned about many things I wish I did not know or could forget. But one thing I know and will not forget is the remarkable creativity, energy, resourcefulness and fortitude of the women who, with amazing courage and grace, showed us the way.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Namibia, who will speak on behalf of the Group of African States.

Mr. Emvula (Namibia): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the African Group at this international gathering of women and men all working together to create ideas, strategies and commitments for empowering women across the world. The African Group aligns itself with the statement to be delivered by the representative of South Africa on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

The African Group is honoured to have participated in the unveiling of *The Ark of Return*, which will serve as a permanent memorial in honour of the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. More than two centuries after slavery and the transatlantic slave trade were abolished, it is critical that we continue to take the time to remember the victims of that great blight on the history of mankind. Indeed, it is in keeping the memory of the victims alive that we may always remind present and future generations of the dangers of allowing one human being to completely subjugate another, without censure.

The memorial should also serve as a reminder of the level of barbarity to which mankind is capable of descending, if racist attitudes are left to fester and grow unchecked within a society. Such attitudes have played a large role in enabling societies and nations to tolerate the barbarity perpetrated against other human beings through slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. The ceremony took place as we had just launched the International Decade for People of African Descent, for the period 2015-2024, as well as the celebration of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, whose theme invited us to learn from historical tragedies, how to combat racism today.

The African Group recognizes the tremendous contributions of Member States which, together with the foundations, have made the memorial a reality. The Permanent Memorial Committee established by the General Assembly through resolution 63/5 to oversee the permanent memorial project was drawn from all geographical regions, with Member States from the Caribbean Community and the African Union playing a primary role and has been the cornerstone of that laudable initiative.

We welcome the selection of this year's theme of the United Nations commemorative event, which is "Women and slavery". The theme is fitting as, additionally, 2015 marks the twentieth anniversary of the Beijing Platform of Action and the African Union theme for 2015 is "Women's empowerment and development towards Africa's agenda 2063". The African women's decade declared by the African Union in 2010, now marks its fifth year. Indeed, all of those important milestones have aligned to illustrate the important role that women play in our societies.

We are proud to be here today to speak about women and slavery and ways in which historians are today acknowledging the vital roles women played in the slave communities. Understanding the role women played in the slave trade and the slave community is important in offering a new dynamic in the general study of slave culture. Often the history of slavery is studied from a male perspective, thereby failing to acknowledge the importance of women in all levels of slavery and belittling and devaluing their roles.

What seems to be forgotten is that, not only were slave women subordinate because of their race, but they also shared the trials of oppression directed at the female gender. Moreover, enslaved women played a key role in the development of slave communities through the development of family structures and economic productivity. Further to the dynamic role they played in their communities, the voices of slave women portrayed the sufferings they endured and exploitation and inhumane treatment at the hand of their masters, overseers and ship crews.

Through the tones of their voices and daring actions, slave women rose up in brave acts of liberty. Examples of such brave acts were the Maroon women in the Caribbean. They were rebellion leaders and priestesses who rallied the troops; soaring among them was the formidable Ashanti Nanny, in Jamaica. We were happy to be informed today that the Right Honourable Prime Minister seems to have descended from that generation. Nanny was never a slave, but a free woman who was painfully aware of the suffering and degradation her fellow slave sisters and country women endured. A spectacular and living example of a village that illustrates the struggle against the slave traders is the village of Ganvie, on Lake Nokoué in Benin.

In her book *Women in Caribbean History*, Verene Shepherd states that until the 1970s, Caribbean books neglected to mention women because early historians perceived colonization, government, religion, trade and warfare activities as very much male-dominated. There was also the belief that women's issues did not merit inclusion and where women could have been included, such as in slave uprisings, their contributions were ignored. Starting in the 1970s, the study of social history became more prominent and looked into topics such as family life.

In slave societies of the Caribbean in the late eighteenth century, domestic female slaves were more common on plantations where sugar production was the most rapid. Also, more often than not, slave assignments were based on the greatest profit to the slave owner.

In many cases, female slaves often preferred domestic labour to field labour, but as time wore on the trend was to move women into the fields to replace the declining total of young male slaves. That was due to female slaves living longer and the fact that they were versatile in both domestic and agricultural activities, which led to their image as somewhat animalistic due to their unparalleled female strength.

In addition, the enslaved women were sometimes able to produce their own food or craft work for the family and the market, and, as such, dominated that area. The market also became the place where the enslaved could gather and exchange news. It was thus obvious that if enslaved women dominated the markets they were also responsible for disseminating information, which allowed news to be passed among family members in different plantations and even helped in the planning of uprisings.

The market was also a vital place in the slave community, because there the rules for enslaved congregations were relaxed. In those places, slave women could almost freely be themselves and teach their children about their culture and customs, allowing their knowledge to be passed down to future generations and further developed. This knowledge was imparted to the children through their mothers' passive resistance, which was very common. They did this in their daily domestic tasks by "accidentally" burning their mistress's favourite dress while ironing, singing their songs as they worked, not allowing their children to forget where they came from and teaching them to be proud of who they were and their roots.

One example of how pride and self-awareness imparted through their mothers and allowed cultures and traditions to develop over time was the development of capoeira in Brazil. In the senzalas, or slave quarters on the plantations, the slaves strove to use their diverse African roots and power to break out of their chains. Even though slaves did not necessarily speak a common language, they shared their passionate struggle for freedom. They fought roughly, physically preparing themselves to flee and regain their humanity. All slaves came to the conclusion that, in order to escape, they needed to gather strength and unity.

The abolition of slavery and the slave trade marked a pivotal moment in history and in the lives of millions of slaves, the overwhelming majority of whom were people of African descent. However, it was only the first step towards ensuring justice and full equality for African descendants, wherever they may be. The abolition not only marked the end of an era, but also signified the start of a process that continues to this day and will end only with the total emancipation of people of African descent everywhere, and their equal enjoyment of all economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights.

The 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in London also became an inspiration for the women's rights movement. When women were not allowed to speak at the Convention, Anne Knight became furious, and this inspired her to start a campaign for equal rights for women. It is of paramount importance that societies remember and learn from these powerful women. Even with the end of the transatlantic slave trade, that was not the end of the hardships and suffering slave women suffered. Today, slaves still exist, and women and children are a major focus of these modern-day slavers—known today as human traffickers. We as a society should always remember that slavery is a hidden crime that denies women and children their rights and liberties. We should always pay tribute to all those who have fought and will fight against slavery in the past, in the present and in future.

As I conclude, allow me to highlight that, as we remember these victims of slavery, we must also redouble our efforts to address modern forms of slavery and serfdom. We should increase regional and international cooperation with a view to cracking down on such practices. No occasion could be more appropriate than the International Decade for People of African Descent, which happily coincides this year with the twentieth anniverary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, to promote this important agenda. The abuse of modern technologies in this area and the increasing sophistication of human trafficking syndicates necessitate robust regional and international cooperation activities. We cannot allow any manifestations of slavery to exist in the modern world.

The President: I now the give the floor to the representative of Yemen, who will speak on behalf of the Asia-Pacific States.

Mr. Alyemany (Yemen): The Republic of Yemen has the honour to deliver this statement on behalf of the Group of Asia-Pacific States in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic

slave trade and on the occasion of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Today, as we remember those who suffered and died during the slave trade, we are reminded that slavery has no place in the civilized world. More than 20 million people are still enslaved. In the world today, men and women, girls and boys are trapped, traded and forced into involuntary service as sex workers, labourers and soldiers. Over a 400-year period, the transatlantic slave trade was the largest forced migration in history. The extensive exodus of Africans to many areas of the world was unprecedented in the annals of recorded human history.

In the past few years, efforts have been made to raise public awareness regarding the slave trade and its lasting consequences on societies throughout the world. As part of those efforts, it is essential to recognize the contribution that enslaved people and their descendants have made to the societies that forced them into bondage. This year's International Day for the Abolition of Slavery comes as the international community is intensifying efforts to achieve the post-2015 development agenda. In pursuing these goals, it is vital that we give special consideration to ending modern-day slavery, which affects the poorest, most socially excluded groups, including migrants, women, ethnic groups that suffer discrimination, minorities and indigenous peoples.

Last year, much progress was made. Many countries have acted to combat slavery through domestic legislation and greater coordination. More and more businesses are working to ensure that their activities do not cause or contribute to contemporary forms of slavery in the workplace and their supply chains. We all strongly support this initiative. We affirm that the partnership of the private sector in implementing these efforts, is critical. Governments continue to play a major role in assisting victims, often with the support of the United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery. I urge continued support for that vital initiative. As we mark the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, let us join forces to make our world slavery-free.

In commemoration of the memory of the victims, the General Assembly, in its resolution 62/122, declared 25 March the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, to be observed annually. The resolution also called for the establishment of an outreach programme to mobilize educational institutions, civil society and other organizations to inculcate future generations as to the causes, consequences and lessons of the transatlantic slave trade, and to communicate the dangers of racism and prejudice. Through the consolidation of existing partnerships and the establishment of new ones, the fight against modern slavery is one of the greatest human rights causes of our time.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Slovenia, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Eastern European States.

Mr. Marn (Slovenia): I have the honour to deliver this statement on behalf of the Group of Eastern European States.

Slavery and the slave trade were horrible tragedies in the history of humankind that cannot be forgotten. For over 400 years, more than 15 million men, women and children were the victims of the transatlantic slave trade. The International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, which we commemorate every year on 25 March, offers the opportunity to honour and remember those who suffered and died at the hands of the brutal slavery system. It also offers the opportunity to remind us that slavery in its contemporary forms continues to exist in all parts of the globe.

We commend the work of the United Nations, its agencies and mechanisms to address those shameful practices. Research, education and awareness-raising are important elements of combating slavery and slavery-like practices. Different initiatives have been taken up in the United Nations in the past years, with a view to educating about the history of slavery, its lasting impact and current slavery issues. Recently, the General Assembly proclaimed the International Decade for People of African Descent, which will be observed from 2015 to 2024.

Today, we have added a new reminder of that horrible tragedy. Just moments ago we unveiled the permanent memorial. *The Ark of Return* will not only contribute to honouring the memory of the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade; it will also serve as a constant reminder that the denial of one's freedom is the gravest attack on their dignity and worth. We are very encouraged to see that with the assistance and financial support of many Member States, the efforts to build the memorial were fruitful.

With this year's commemoration, which is devoted to women and slavery, we pay tribute to the many enslaved women who endured unbearable hardships, among them sexual exploitation. We also celebrate those who fought for freedom from slavery and advocated for its abolition. Their work and sacrifices must not be forgotten. We must also not forget the strength of enslaved women, many of whom succeeded in transmitting their African culture to their descendants despite the many abuses they had to endure.

In conclusion, allow me to particularly commend States members of the Caribbean Community and African Group for their tireless efforts in raising awareness on this issue.

The Chair: I now give the floor to the representative of Jamaica, who will speak on behalf of the Latin American and Caribbean States.

Mr. Rattray (Jamaica): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States as Chair for the month of March. This statement reflects the position of our Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

The International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade is an important one on the calendar of international days declared by the General Assembly. It is the pinnacle of a series of events and activities that are bringing focus and attention to the issue of slavery. Among other things, resolution 61/19, adopted as the General Assembly commemorated the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transantlantic slave trade, designated the Day, and speaks to the purpose behind the commemoration. It reminds us that we not only remember the victims and honour their sacrifice, but we also need to address the legacies that remain from that dark and horrific period of human history.

We are pleased that our countries have been very active in the efforts of the international community to rectify the negative impacts that slavery has had on society, and in the lives of our people. Latin American and Caribbean countries, as reflected by the CELAC special declaration on the initiative of erecting a permanent memorial in honour of the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, helped spearhead the initiative to erect the permanent memorial, and are pleased that we have been able to unveil the beautiful and impactful *The Ark of Return* this afternoon. Our countries were actively involved in the push for the proclamation of the International Decade for People of African Descent and the adoption of an ambitious, yet effective, programme of activities to give meaningful implementation to the Decade, through which the international community and its members are called to honour the memory of victims of tragedies such as the transatlantic slave trade, with a view to closing those dark chapters in history and as a means of reconciliation and healing.

We have made these commitments because our countries believe firmly that the most meaningful way to honour the victims of slavery is by dealing with the present realities faced by their descendants who populate our region, bringing the diversity and strength that makes our societies strong. Our CELAC plan of action for Latin American and Caribbean peoples of African descent adopted at the third CELAC Summit held in Belen, Costa Rica, in 2015 guides our efforts to fully incorporate people of African descent and ensure that the development goals at the national and regional levels are inclusive.

This year's thematic focus for the international day and commemoration programme, "Women and slavery", fittingly coincides with the twentieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. That overlap gives us greater opportunity to consider the unique challenges faced by slave women and the role women played in the resistance to slavery and its eventual collapse. Women faced exacerbated hardships for, in addition to being slaves, they were also women — subjected to devaluing, sexual and physical violence, the unequal burden of raising families and caring for the children, the sick and the elderly without their male counterparts, in an often purposeful exercise by the established plantocracy. It was through their resilience, sacrifice, creativity and hard work that many were able to survive, and in some cases thrive despite their circumstances.

These circumstances mirror the very issues addressed by the Beijing Conference and its outcomes. They remain relevant today, because women of African descent continue to face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. The struggle of the slave woman to overcome therefore continues and rests with us to complete the ultimate victory over discrimination and inequality.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the lingering effects of slavery have had and continue to have an indelible impact on our societies. On the one hand, we

have a diversity of ethnicity and culture that embodies our valuable human capital. On the other hand, however, we have ingrained social stratification, much of which bears its origins to the colonial era, where exploitation of both indigenous and imported peoples took place. Latin American and Caribbean States are determined, however, to achieve a society where all people are equal, where one's prospects and developmental achievements are not marked by the color of one's skin or their ethnic background. We are striving for fully inclusive societies, where all can benefit from the progress we make and, at the same time, contribute to that progress.

The peoples of our region have suffered an incalculable wrong. In some cases, there has been the beginning of reconciliation and justice. We are mindful, however, that much more needs to be done to balance the scales of justice. The inequalities and repression developed out of slavery and the slave trade were man-made; in the same way, the undoing of those challenges needs to be addressed by all of us working together to ensure that in all the dimensions of sustainable development, those who were exploited and harmed are allowed their just part in global progress. We must ensure that in crafting the global development agenda we take full account of the special needs of those who have been set back by the travesty of slavery. Once and for all we should begin to right those wrongs.

Latin American and Caribbean States will continue to support and lead our collective actions here at the United Nations to honour the victims of slavery, including through the International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2024, the educational outreach activities of the "Remember slavery" programme, and in any forum seeking to address the legacies of slavery, such as racism, racial discrimination, contemporary forms of slavery and human trafficking. We acknowledge the tragedy; we consider the legacy. We will never forget.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Belgium, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Western European and Other States.

Ms. Frankinet (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the Group of Western European and Other States in commemoration of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Slavery during the transatlantic slave trade was a crime against humanity and among the worst violations of human rights in history. The transatlantic slave trade was an unparalleled tragedy that persisted for over four centuries; it involved the merciless kidnapping, massive abuse and cruel enslavement of millions of Africans, many of whom perished during the horrific journey across the Atlantic.

Today we gather to pay our respects to the countless victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade and to commemorate the immense suffering and injustice they endured. We also pay tribute to the fight against slavery and recall the courage of the enslaved men and women who struggled to end the oppression. It is estimated that one third of the people who were forcibly taken from their homeland in Africa through the transatlantic slave trade were women. Those women who survived suffered tremendously from the hardships of forced labour, sexual exploitation, gender discrimination and rape and torture, yet their stories often remain untold.

We have just witnessed here, at the United Nations, the unveiling ceremony of *The Ark of Return*, the permanent memorial in honour of the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. We thank the Chairman of the Permanent Memorial Committee, Ambassador Courtenay Rattray, Permanent Representative of Jamaica, and all of the Committee members for their leadership in that regard. The monument not only serves as a powerful reminder of the unbearable hardship and tragic death of the millions of men, women and children who died as a result of slavery; it also requires us to reflect on the devastating and long-lasting impact of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. It reminds us that much work remains today in order to combat the dangers of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

Today's observance occurs during the first year of the International Decade for People of African Descent. We begin the decade with a full and robust commitment to ensuring the rights of persons of African descent and combating racism and discrimination against them. Today's observance should also encourage us to act in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which proclaims in its article 4 that "No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms".

Unfortunately, slavery is not only a tragedy of the past. Today, millions of men, women, and children all over the world are subjected to contemporary slavery-like practices such as sex trafficking, forced labour — including forced child labour, domestic

servitude and bonded labour — and early and forced marriage. Women and children, especially adolescent girls, make up the majority of victims of those dehumanizing and abhorrent practices.

It is our obligation as Member States to comply with our obligations under international human rights law and international law pertaining to trafficking in persons; we must redouble our efforts to eradicate all forms of modern slavery and to ensure justice, dignity and freedom for all.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the United States of America, as host country.

Ms. Sison (United States of America): I am honoured to be here today and I wish to begin by reading out a letter from the United States Congressional Black Caucus addressed to the Secretary-General:

> "Dear Secretary-General:
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> "Over four centuries, more than 18 million people were forcefully removed from their homes in Africa and exiled into slavery in the Americas and Europe. Thousands would perish as a result of the cruel treatment undergone during the Middle Passage. For those who survived, the appalling and inhumane conditions of slavery awaited them at their destination.
>
> "Slavery remains an immoral stain on the history of the United States and the collective history of humankind. We can never forget the horrors that were inflicted on our brothers and sisters through slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. Nor can we forget the lingering effects this tragedy continues to have in our society.
>
> "The Permanent Memorial at the United Nations in Honour of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade is a reminder of the terrible legacy of slavery, yet for future generations, it serves as an opportunity to understand the history and consequences of slavery, as well as an educational tool to increase awareness about the ever-present dangers of racism and prejudice. The memorial acknowledges the tragedies of slavery but also celebrates the heroic efforts of the slaves, abolitionists and unsung heroes who acted in the face of great danger to end the inhumanities of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade.
>
> "The placement of the permanent memorial at United Nations Headquarters is a significant symbol of the promotion and preservation of the dignity and worth of all human beings, principles that are central to the Charter of the United Nations. The Congressional Black Caucus is pleased that the United States of America is making a contribution to the permanent memorial through a private-public funding model. That contribution is especially important given the unique role that slavery and the transatlantic slave trade have had in the establishment, development and growth of our country. While the memorial cannot undo the horrors of slavery and the slave trade, or the lingering consequences that still impact the descendants of its victims, it serves to acknowledge its horror, while educating all future generations about the dangers of racism and prejudice. The establishment of the memorial is an important recognition of past horrors and a call to continue our efforts to undo the lasting legacy of racism, which continues to oppress millions."

The letter is signed by Representative G. K. Butterfield, Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, and Representative Barbara Lee, Member of Congress. I would like to add that we are also very honoured to have witnessed the unveiling this afternoon of *The Ark of Return*, the permanent memorial to the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. It stands as a tribute to all of slavery's victims, including those who escaped bondage and helped others in their journey to freedom.

There is no greater blemish on the history of the United States of America than that of slavery, the crime defined by freedom denied. Around the year 1627, not far from these United Nations Headquarters, the first enslaved Africans arrived in present-day New York City. In fact, one of the walls of New Amsterdam's fort, built by enslaved African people, is bordered by today's Wall Street. The stories of transatlantic slavery and its abolition, along with the stories of heroes, such as Harriet Tubman, who helped free slaves through the Underground Railroad, are woven into the very fabric of our nation.

Over the long arc of history, females in slavery have been exceptionally victimized. That is still true today. While sexual violence is used to compel the servitude of males and females alike, women and girls are often its victims. And victims of domestic servitude, who

more often than not are female, are literally held in servitude behind closed doors, invisible to those who might otherwise be able to help, and at the complete mercy of their masters.

Today's observance occurs during the first year of the International Decade for People of African Descent. The United States comes to the Decade with a full and robust commitment to ensuring the rights of persons of African descent, and to combating racism and discrimination against them. Indeed, that is our commitment to members of all groups. So let us take this day to remember the victims of the transatlantic slave trade. Together we abolished that trade, and we must act in accordance with our international and domestic obligations to do the same for modern-day slavery.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of South Africa, who will speak on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

Mr. Mamabolo (South Africa): I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for convening this meeting to commemorate the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

I am speaking today on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. The Group notes that the theme for 2015's International Day of Remembrance is "Women and slavery". Women in slavery had to face issues of great complexity. They had to deal with dual oppression because of both their race and their gender. Women had to bear the tortures of slave breeding, sexual exploitation, harassment and working in less than ideal conditions. Despite their suffering, they contributed enormously to the societies they served, helping to ensure the prosperity and growth of modern societies.

The debate today provides us with a unique opportunity to further discuss a horrendous crime against humanity and assist us in our fight against all forms of discrimination and contemporary manifestations of slavery. Political will, strong commitment and new and sustainable partnerships are essential if we are to address past and present injustices in order to develop a new, equitable and just world. The concept of slavery has a very long history; in fact, the tragedy of slavery began some six centuries ago, and is directly linked to the practices of colonialism and imperialism. The width and breadth of the entire continent of Africa, the Caribbean and Asia were devastated by this barbaric practice, which led to the subjugation of the entire continent and its peoples. Slavery and the slave trade, and the transatlantic slave trade in particular, brought about untold miseries, and the cascading effects of those abhorrent legacies are still being felt even today.

At the core of this tragic history of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade is the plundering of the entire continent of Africa and the stealing of her vital resources and artifacts. Slavery has undergone various transformations since its abolition in the nineteenth century, reappearing in the form of indentured labour and bonded labour. It continues to manifest itself in contemporary forms, including trafficking in persons, sexual exploitation, bonded labour and forced marriages. In the current era of globalization, we should accord high priority to eradicating the socioeconomic causes of modern slavery, including, among other things, poverty and underdevelopment, marginalization, social exclusion, economic disparities, instability and insecurity.

We welcome the historic unveiling of the permanent memorial, *The Ark of Return*, as a symbol of remembrance and respect for the victims of the transatlantic slave trade. We also welcome the observance at the United Nations marking the eighth International Day of Remembrance of the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, in which more than 15 million slaves perished during the Middle Passage while being transported to North America and Europe. We believe that the memorial will serve as a significant symbol and reminder of what the United Nations represents — the promotion and preservation of the dignity and worth of all human beings, principles that are central to its Charter. We hope that it will further serve as a concrete reminder of the painful legacy of the slave trade.

Despite the progress made in our fight against all forms of discrimination, much more remains to be done to overcome the racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerances that continue to bedevil the human race. We call upon the international community to strengthen its political commitment and mobilize adequate resources, which will assist in the comprehensive implementation of the outcomes of the Durban process. New and emerging challenges include misuse of information and communications technology to incite hatred, violence and racism. Recent events

within the sporting fraternity are a testimony to the resurgence of a particularly aggressive and at times violent form of racial discrimination.

In conclusion, the Group deplores the continued denial that slavery, the slave trade and the transatlantic slave trade was the worst form of racism and racial discrimination in recorded history. There are vital lessons to be drawn from this grim picture. The international community must continue to encourage educational outreach programmes to raise awareness on slavery and its contemporary forms and take precautions that the tragedy is not repeated by future generations. The Group believes that tolerance and respect for diversity should be the intrinsic value for humanity in the twenty-first century.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Antigua and Barbuda, who will speak on behalf of the Caribbean Community.

Mr. Webson (Antigua and Barbuda): I thank you, Mr. President, for your leadership in bringing the Assembly together to discuss this very important issue.

The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) aligns itself with the statements made by the representatives of Jamaica and South Africa on behalf of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States and the Group of 77 and China, respectively. I have the honour of speaking today on behalf of the members of the Caribbean Community, the States of CARICOM.

For our people, today is both a solemn and yet celebratory occasion. It is solemn because we commemorate the victims of the heinous crime against humanity embodied in chattel slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. We recall the loss and suffering of millions of our ancestors during that dark period. We remember the injustice and inhumanity, some of which lingers today. It gives us cause to reflect, ponder and meditate.

We nevertheless recognize the celebratory nature of the occasion. We celebrate the fact that, through the struggles, we have overcome. We celebrate the dismantling of the slave trade and of slavery, in solemn remembrance of our people. We celebrate the recognition that all of us, as an international community, must continue to work towards addressing the legacies of slavery. We celebrate the historic unveiling earlier this afternoon of the Permanent Memorial to Honour the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, an initiative pioneered by the CARICOM group that has finally come to fruition.

The theme for this year's commemoration is quite apt, as we mark the twentieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. Focusing on women and slavery presents us not only with the opportunity to uncover the unique ways in which women were particularly affected by slavery but also the significant contributions of women in the resistance movement that led to the abolition of slavery and the slave trade.

We pay due respect and recognition to the role played by women across the Caribbean region in the fight against slavery. One can recount the heroics of the Maroon leader Nanny — we acknowledge the presence today of a descendant of that leader, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Jamaica — and the defiance of Zabeth in Haiti, Nanny Grigg of Barbados and many others.

Millions of women struggled to raise and care for their families on plantations even as they were being exploited. Many were subjected to sexual violence and treated as reproduction factories, particularly after the abolition of the slave trade reduced planters' ability to acquire new slaves. In view of their purposeful actions, many women bore the sole responsibility of raising children and managing their homes. One can see the fruits of these seeds today.

Women faced a double burden during slavery, as they were undervalued because of their sex and dehumanized because of their race. Nevertheless, through strength and perseverance, slave women have left for us a legacy of determination, sacrifice, creativity, adaptability and resilience that characterizes Caribbean women today. Having gone through the fire, we have emerged stronger in spite of the ills of the slavery period.

CARICOM reiterates the importance of addressing the legacies of slavery, including racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and prejudice. Having overcome slavery, we cannot tolerate the root cause of that injustice and that inhuman system regaining a foothold in our societies. People of African descent continue to face too many uphill battles in seeking to be treated equally and to have fair access to justice, employment and economic opportunities, quality education, housing, health care and free movement

without harassment. In too many places, the boundaries of one's achievements are defined by the colour of one's skin rather than the capacity of one's competence and character. It is no coincidence that there remains a high correlation between poverty and race in many countries, including in countries that are on the upward trend in economic development. That is why it is important that the programme of activities for the International Decade for People of African Descent be effectively used to dismantle inequities and any vestige of the disadvantages faced by the descendants of slavery.

We should also pursue every effort to have meaningful restitution for the wrongs that were perpetrated against children of African descent and of slaves. CARICOM's Reparatory Justice Programme seeks to create the framework within which a just and lasting reconciliation of responsibilities can be achieved. We are open and prepared to engage in a constructive and conciliatory dialogue to ensure that the wrongs of the past can be balanced against the rights of the present and future.

On behalf of the CARICOM group of nations, I would like to express our profound gratitude to our partners across the various regional groups within the United Nations for their support of the CARICOM initiative and effort to erect a permanent memorial as a lasting tribute to honour the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. We want to salute our leading partners, the African group, for their collaboration. We especially thank those delegations that worked with us through the Permanent Memorial Committee, and include there for special mention UNESCO, the Department of Public Information and the United Nations Office for Partnerships. All of us are truly grateful.

We have not forgotten the diligent and committed work of those who pioneered this project from its earliest stages, from the very day it was first mentioned. We must mention the former Permanent Representative of Jamaica, Ambassador Raymond Wolfe, whose tireless work has helped to bring us to where we are. This afternoon we unveiled *The Ark of Return* on the visitor's plaza, the memorial designed and built by a son of the Caribbean, Rodney Leon, of whom we are immensely proud. The permanent memorial will stand on these grounds and speak volumes to hundreds of thousands in the years to come.

I could not close without expressing sincere thanks to all those who made voluntary contributions towards the construction of the memorial. Those included Member States from all regions, of all sizes and at all stages of development. It includes civil society and private individuals who saw a need to commit to this worthy cause.

In closing, CARICOM reiterates that the progress we have made should not cause us to rest on our laurels. In fact, we believe that this opportunity must be built upon. We believe that, by all means at our disposal, we must fight to combat racism and eliminate racial discrimination. The modern-day manifestations of slavery should be not be accepted at any price. We, who have come out of slavery victorious over the inhumanity of that crime, should be at the vanguard and forefront of leading and saying that this tragedy must never again happen. We stand together and say, as a legacy, it must never again occur.

The President: I now give the floor to the observer of the European Union.

Mr. Mayr-Harting (European Union): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union. The candidate countries Turkey, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Iceland, Serbia and Albania; the country of the Stabilization and Association Process and potential candidate Bosnia and Herzegovina; and the European Free Trade Association countries Liechtenstein and Norway, members of the European Economic Area, as well as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Armenia and Georgia, align themselves with this statement.

At the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in 2001, the European Union joined the international community in acknowledging that slavery and the slave trade, including the transatlantic slave trade, were appalling tragedies in the history of humankind, not only because of their abhorrent barbarism but also in terms of their magnitude, organized nature and especially their negation of the essence of the victims. The Conference further acknowledged that slavery and the slave trade are a crime against humanity and should always have been so, especially the transatlantic slave trade, and are among the major sources and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and that Africans and people of African descent, Asians and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of these acts and continue to be victims of their consequences.

In 2007, the General Assembly agreed to establish a permanent memorial on the grounds of the United Nations to honour the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, and today the United Nations community has witnessed the unveiling of the memorial, entitled *The Ark of Return*. The memorial will remind us of the tragic legacy of the slave trade and the need to continue the fight against racism and prejudice.

We would like to acknowledge the work of the committee of interested States and the generous voluntary contributions from Member States, complemented by funding from foundations and private individuals. A particular word of praise is due to Jamaica and its Permanent Representative, Mr. Courtenay Rattray, Chair of the Permanent Memorial Committee, for the leadership and commitment shown to bring this project to a successful conclusion and to all members of the Permanent Memorial Committee for their dedication.

No effort should be spared to raise awareness of and educate and inform current and future generations about the causes, consequences and lessons of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. In this context, we want to acknowledge the work carried out by UNESCO and the Department of Public Information.

This IInternational Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Tradecontributes to the remembrance of the millions of persons who suffered from the transatlantic slave trade. This day should also help us to remember that, despite their prohibition, slavery and slavery-like practices, in the form of trafficking of persons and other forms of modern slavery, persist and constitute flagrant violations of human rights. The lessons of the past should urge us to address this slave trade of our time, including by addressing root causes and by combating discrimination on any grounds. We owe it to the women, men, girls and boys who, as we speak here, are being kept against their will and exploited in appalling conditions. Every victim of modern slavery is one victim too many. We now have legal instruments, such as the Palermo Protocol, aimed at the prevention of trafficking in persons, protection of its victims and prosecution of its perpetrators. Further steps need to be taken towards their full implementation.

The memorial and this day should be a reminder of a time when human beings were treated as commodities that were openly traded, but should also remind us of the victorious fight from oppression to freedom and the quest for universal human rights, guided by the belief in human dignity and in the equality of all human beings.

Mr. Nicholson (Jamaica): Jamaica aligns itself with the statements delivered by the Permanent Representative of the Republic of South Africa on behalf of the Group of 77 and China and the Permanent Representative of Antigua and Barbuda on behalf of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

I am honoured to speak at this year's commemorative meeting and feel particularly privileged to do so following today's unveiling of the permanent memorial. Jamaica is proud of the prominent role played by the member States of the Caribbean Community in the permanent memorial initiative. We feel especially honoured to have been given the responsibility for steering it to its successful outcome.

I express special appreciation to our brothers and sisters from the continent of Africa, who partnered with us throughout the entire process. To the other members of the Permanent Memorial Committee, led at first by Ambassador Raymond Wolfe, former Permanent Representative of Jamaica to the United Nations and now by Ambassador Courtenay Rattray, our current Permanent Representative, I convey our heartfelt appreciation for their dedication to the planning of the year-long series of activities that formed part of the "Remember slavery" programme. Of course, Jamaica remains truly grateful to the entire membership of the United Nations and to those who contributed to the initiative. Without their generous contributions, the project would not have been possible.

Slavery and the transatlantic slave trade have left an injurious legacy, the effects of which continue to be felt in the lives of people of African descent all across the globe. It has manifested itself in racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance. As is often said, those who do not know their history are destined to repeat it. In this regard, there is a need to ensure that the permanent memorial initiative and its associated activities reach and resonate with the people outside these venerable halls. We commend the work of the Secretariat, through the Department of Public Information, for expanding the reach of the programme through partnerships and collaboration with organizations around the world. However, we encourage the Department to further intensify its outreach efforts with a view to ensuring that the lessons of struggle, hope, victory, equality, non-discrimination

and harmony are imprinted on the hearts and minds of international citizenry and that bigotry becomes a thing of the past.

It is most fitting that the theme of this year's commemoration is "Women and slavery". We dare not forget that women suffered monstrously during one of the darkest moments in human history. The great human rights icon Nelson Mandela once said that the legacy of oppression weighs heavily on women. The truth of this statement echoes throughout history, as evidenced by the barbarism of slavery and its impact on women. Black women suffered the horror of being raped repeatedly, bred like cattle, robbed of family and denied the joy of nurturing their own children.

The struggle for equal civil rights and the advancement of women has been long, bitter and painful. I pause to recognize some of the heroines of emancipation: the Jamaican national heroine Nanny of the Maroons; the Cuban fighter La Carlota; Mary Prince of Bermuda; and Harriet Tubman of the United States of America. They dared to believe that it was possible to overcome the dehumanization and indignity of slavery and the slave trade. They fought courageously against the evils of oppression, torture and injustice. In paying tribute to the women of the past, let us redouble our efforts to build on the foundations they laid, lest we forget. We must ensure that these stories are told. We must heal the wounds. We must right the wrongs.

Let us also recall that this year marks the twentieth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995 and attended by my own Prime Minister, who is here with us today. That Conference produced landmark outcome documents, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which have charted the course towards gender equality and the empowerment of women, journeys on which we have embarked over the past two decades. Let us not fail to give meaning to those commitments, and may history find reason to judge us more kindly where our women are concerned.

Mr. Régis (Haiti) (*spoke in French*): More than twelve years ago, the General Assembly decided to proclaim 2004 the International Year to Commemorate the Struggle against Slavery and its Abolition. The choice of today's date, which marks the bicentenary of the proclamation of Haitian independence, was intended at the same time to be a glowing tribute to Haiti, the first black republic in the world, a symbol of slave resistance and the slaves' struggle against the system of colonial oppression.

Subsequently, the General Assembly adopted resolution 61/19 on the commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. After recalling the horrors of the slave trade, which for 400 years had stripped Africa of some 15 million men, women and children who were transported against their will to the Americas, the Assembly decided to designate 25 March as the annual International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In the aftermath, the international community was invited to respond to what is a duty of memory by making a fitting tribute to those millions of people and by ensuring that the lessons, history and consequences of slavery and the slave trade are imparted to future generations.

Ms. Rambally (Saint Lucia), Vice-President, took the Chair.

Unprecedented in the annals of the history of humankind, the transatlantic slave trade was, to cite the famous phrase, barbarism unprecedented in the history of barbarism. However, it took almost 200 years for the international community to recognize that slavery and the slave trade are crimes against humanity. The inauguration today at the United Nations headquarters of the permanent memorial to honour the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade is therefore powerfully symbolic. It is timely and marks an important milestone in the efforts worldwide to institutionalize memory and prevent forgetfulness.

The Republic of Haiti is even more glad that *The Ark of Return*, a masterful work chosen from over 300 design proposals submitted by artists from 83 countries, is the result of the work and experience of an architect of Haitian origin, Mr. Rodney Leon. I would like to convey to Mr. Leon the congratulations of the President of the Republic, His Excellency Mr. Michel Joseph Martelly, as well as the expression of the admiration of the people and the Government of Haiti.

By its evocative power, through the painful majesty that emerges from it, *The Ark of Return* poignantly recalls the memory of this tragedy to which it restores its rightful place in the minds of us all, as pointed out by UNESCO. The monument now ranks high among the distinctive elements of the visitors' esplanade at the United Nations Headquarters. It challenges and invites us to revisit this past and to reflect on the horrors of the

slave trade and to become aware of the consequences of slavery.

Pointing out the symbolism of the work, the architect was compelled at the presentation of the design to say that *The Ark of Return* is both a symbolic spiritual space and an object where one can interact and pass through for acknowledgement, contemplation, meditation, reflection, healing, education and transformation. Indeed, in the never-ending fight for the promotion and absolute respect for human rights, the Memorial addresses everyone with today's essential message, which the Director-General of UNESCO, Ms. Irina Bokova, admirably summarized when she referred to *The Ark of Return* as a bridge over the Atlantic, aptly adding later,

> "From oppression to freedom, from trauma to healing, the Permanent Memorial on the grounds of the United Nations will stand as a symbol of the efforts engaged by the international community and by citizens worldwide to break the silence on this history ... This will be a powerful tribute to the victims, to all women and men fighting for universal human rights."

That is the vocation of the permanent memorial to the victims of slavery and *The Ark of Return* — to raise awareness of this tragedy, which remains one of the greatest violations of human rights in the history of humankind, and at the same time convey a message of peace, hope, tolerance, dignity of the human person and of universal solidarity.

It is to the credit of the United Nations for taking this initiative and for having inspired this beautiful project, which is so well in line with its mission of promoting fundamental freedoms and human rights. I take this opportunity, on behalf of the people and the Government of Haiti, to express our deep appreciation to the General Assembly, the President of the Permanent Memorial Committee, all States of the Caribbean Community and the African Union, and all the Member States that, by their generous contributions to the United Nations Trust Fund for Partnerships — Permanent Memorial, allowed this project to come to fruition.

Our thanks also go to the Secretary-General and the Secretariat; to UNESCO, which, together with the Permanent Memorial Committee, coordinated the first phase of the international design competition; to architect Rodney Leon and the project team; and to all the men and women who, in one way or another, worked for the realization of *The Ark of Return*.

Mr. Guilherme de Aguiar Patriota (Brazil): Brazil associates itself with the statements made on behalf of the Group of 77 and China and the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States, which reflects the position of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States.

The year 2015 marks the beginning of the third international decade for people of African descent. In the programme of activities for this decade, we have committed to promoting greater knowledge and recognition of and respect for the culture, history and heritage of people of African descent. The permanent memorial unveiled today is the first concrete initiative in this context, and Brazil is honoured to have contributed to the project at its early stages.

Slavery, the slave trade and the transatlantic slave trade — or the African Holocaust — victimized over 15 million people, much more than any other persecution of ethnic groups since the Second World War. We have been able to eliminate the scourge of slavery. However, racial inequality and discrimination still remain. More than three centuries of slavery and slave trade have seriously impinged on the population of African descent in Brazil, who account for over a 100 million people. People of African descent still have limited access to education, health and housing. They subsist on lower incomes and are more vulnerable to violence. In many cases, they are largely invisible, as if inequality were a matter of course.

Women and girls of African descent experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, vulnerability and marginalization. Young Brazilians of African descent are more vulnerable to violence and account for nearly 80 per cent of the victims of homicides. In addressing racial discrimination and inequality in Brazil, we have made every effort to design programmes and policies that have women as the main beneficiaries. To redress the situation of young Brazilians of African descent, the Government designed a programme to reduce and prevent all forms of violence against them, as well as to promote their social inclusion and empowerment.

We have created a series of specific policies on the fight against poverty and on housing, health and employment. We have included the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history in the mandatory elementary

and middle school curricula in order to improve our children's self-esteem and to raise their awareness with respect to the proud history of the African Brazilians. We have broadened access to higher education and to employment through affirmative action in universities and in the public service.

Affirmative action combined with national policies for eradicating poverty have positively impacted the historically marginalized group of people of African descent in Brazil. Over the past 10 years, Brazil has reduced social and racial inequalities. Brazilians of African descent represented 38 per cent of the middle class in 2002. Today, they account for 75 per cent of this new expanding segment.

Combating racism is not an option; it is a moral and ethical obligation. We are a multi-ethnic and multiracial nation. The value of the contribution brought in by Afro-descendants to the country is an answer to the invisibility of victims of racism and discrimination. We Brazilians hold our heritage in high esteem and are proud of the diversity on which our nation and identity are built.

Racism and inequality are incompatible with democracy. The way by which our societies have made this binomial compatible erodes the concept and undermines efforts to effectively build democracy. We must broaden and strengthen — never reduce — the protection spectrum enshrined in the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action. There will be no effective democracy as long as all forms of discrimination, segregation and intolerance are not permanently banned.

Mr. Aboulatta (Egypt): At the outset, I would like to seize this opportunity to salute the exceptional leadership of the President and commend him for convening this important plenary meeting to commemorate the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Today represents a great occasion for the world to pay tribute to and respect the legacy of the victims of a shameful crime. Our African continent long suffered from many types of unfair exploitation of our rich resources, the worse and most brutal of which was the transatlantic slave trade of millions of our young men and women. Humankind underwent various symptoms of social illnesses that were too often related to colour, race, belief or religion. Regrettably, and despite the serious steps taken by the international community to implement the International Convention on the Abolition of Slavery and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and despite the progress in realizing the universality of the International Covenants on Human Rights, it is very saddening that we still witness new forms of slavery and racism in our contemporary world.

This inhuman and tragic phenomenon represented one of the darkest and disgraceful chapters of humankind. However, the negative heritage of slavery, slave trade, colonialism and foreign occupation and domination still manifest themselves in poverty, underdevelopment, marginalization, social exclusion and economic disparities for the developing world. Our battle is not over. Traditional slavery has been abolished and legally banned, but sadly it was replaced by contemporary forms, including debt bondage, forced labour, child slavery, sexual slavery, forced and early marriages, women and girls' exploitation in pornography, trafficking in persons and injustice to workers, immigrants and refugees.

In order to effectively eradicate slavery in all its forms, Egypt stresses that the international community must formulate and implement strategies and programmes that consolidate ethical norms rejecting the notions of superiority and racial domination and promoting the values of equality, tolerance and coexistence. Likewise, it is imperative to show strong political will and coordinate the actions of Governments to enforce international law and protect the rights of all and monitor and confront the growth of racist campaigns and contemporary forms of slavery.

Finally, we reiterate our pledge to work with all Member States to eradicate all contemporary forms of slavery, as well as intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization.

Mr. Lasso Mendoza (Ecuador) (*spoke in Spanish*): Ecuador adds its voice to the statements made on behalf of the Group of 77 and China and by the representative of Jamaica in his capacity as Chair of our regional Group, which also reflects the position of the States members of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

I would like to highlight the efforts of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) for its leadership both in our region and at the United Nations in implementing these major initiatives to commemorate the victims of

the transatlantic slave trade, as well as the leadership of Ambassador Courtenay Rattray, Permanent Representative of Jamaica, in his capacity as Chair of the Permanent Memorial Committee. We can never repudiate enough the horror of the inhuman system of the transatlantic slave trade, which wrenched tens of millions of people from their homes and left mothers without children and children without mothers, and under which female slaves suffered indiscriminate violence and brutality without compassion.

Slavery could have been conceived only by human beings who believed in the evil of the unfettered accumulation of capital. The results have been so horrific that humankind will never be able to fully atone for them. The legacy of that tragedy has endured in the Americas. In my country, for example, the Afro-Ecuadorian peoples have suffered some of the worst discrimination, and their women from its worst forms. In order to combat this, Ecuador has been working to implement the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, backed by the most vigorous social policy in our country's history aimed at eradicating poverty and exclusion with an unprecedented social investment in health, education, housing, food and social protection focused chiefly on our most disadvantaged populations. We are trying to change the old racist, discriminatory and exclusionary patterns that we inherited from colonial times and that still persist. In that context, in 2012 and 2013, for the first time, we had the honour of seeing 27 worthy Afro-Ecuadorian men and women enter the diplomatic profession.

Finally, I would like to highlight the commitment of our Latin American and Caribbean region, as reflected in the second Political Declaration of Belén, adopted by CELAC in January, which emphasizes the fact that while slavery and the transatlantic slave trade constitute extremely serious crimes against humanity, they have been inadequately studied and their consequences insufficiently acknowledged. The Declaration welcomed CARICOM's creation of a reparations commission designed to identify the problems and challenges that have resulted from the transatlantic slave trade and the genocide of the native populations. At the time the CELAC countries committed to ensuring that such a heinous system can never reappear.

Today, Ecuador reiterates its commitment to continuing to work to ensure the social inclusion of its Afro-Ecuadorian peoples, who, while they became heirs to this tragedy, have powerfully enriched our nation.

Mr. Abdrakhmanov (Kazakhstan): At the outset, I would like to thank the President for convening this commemorative plenary meeting in observation of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. I would also like to thank Ms. Sylviane Diouf for her keynote address and other speakers for their very moving insights on the day's significance.

My delegation would like to align itself with the statement delivered by the representative of Yemen on behalf of the Group of Asia-Pacific States, and I would like to add some remarks in my national capacity.

Every year, on 25 March, we pay tribute to those who were victimized, tortured and killed as a result of the scourge of slavery. In view of how little is still known about the 400-year-long transatlantic slave trade and its lasting consequences, felt throughout the world, the Government of Kazakhstan, as a gesture honouring the victims for their courage and will to survive, has contributed to the construction of *The Ark of Return* permanent memorial that was unveiled today by the Secretary-General, the President of the General Assembly and the Prime Minister of Jamaica in the Visitors' Plaza here in New York. The memorial is a testament to human bravery and the triumph of the human spirit against all odds and indignities.

Since 2015 marks the twentieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, our commemoration this year is rightly dedicated to the theme of slavery and women. As in all situations of injustice and suffering, whether related to conflict, development or natural disasters and other tragic events, women bear the brunt of suffering. Enslaved women therefore bore a triple burden because in addition to enduring the harsh conditions of forced labour as slaves, they experienced extreme forms of discrimination and exploitation as a result of their gender and the colour of their skin. When we contemplate the fate of women trapped in slavery and treated like property or chattel, respect for their dignity and human rights should take precedence.

Slavery did not end with its abolition in the nineteenth century. It has continued to exist, in one form or another, in numerous ways in every country in the world. This illegal practice takes the form of women caught in prostitution, children and adults

forced to work in agricultural and domestic work or in factories and sweatshops producing cheap goods for global supply chains. Unfortunately, slavery is still a blight on today's world. According to the International Labour Organization, around 21 million men, women and children around the world are in a form of slavery. Contemporary slavery takes various forms and affects people of every age, race and gender, as in the cases of bonded labour, child slavery, forced labour, descent-based slavery and restrictions of freedom. The right to the truth, which is both an individual and collective right, is therefore essential not only for victims but for society at large. Uncovering the truth of human rights violations of the past can help prevent human-rights abuses in the future.

What we learned from the tragedy of past experience in my part of the world can best be summarized in the words of my President, Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, speaking in May 2002 at the inauguration of a memorial dedicated to victims of repression buried in secret mass graves in Zhanalyk, near Almaty in southern Kazakhstan, at which he said that we should remember not in order to cover our heads with ashes but in order to prevent such tragedies now and in the future. Young people, he said, should be familiar with history and show full respect to the older generations who had survived a time of such great ordeals. We should do everything possible to ensure that this deplorable, unfortunate historical era will never be forgotten, and that the sad lessons of the past would live on in the memories and hearts of all of us. That is something we should remember every day of our lives in the twenty-first century and in every one of our thoughts, words and deeds, not merely on commemorative occasions.

Today is a day to say no to slavery and all forms of abuse and indignity. This seventieth anniversary year of the United Nations and the ushering in of its post-2015 phase is an era for the greater realization and full blossoming of our human potential. Kazakhstan supports the creation of inclusive, multiracial organizations and movements. We have unique constitutional authority in speaking on issues of inter-ethnic harmony through the so-called Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan. We are steadfastly committed to upholding human security and dignity forever, with freedom and justice for all, in Kazakhstan's very diverse, multi-ethnic and multiconfessional society.

Mr. Ruiz Blanco (Colombia) (*spoke in Spanish*): At the outset, my delegation associates itself with the statements made by the Permanent Representatives of Jamaica and South Africa on behalf of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States and the Group of 77 and China, respectively.

This meeting gives us the opportunity to focus on the subject of slavery, particularly of women, a terrifying system and a tragedy of inconceivable proportions for the millions of people who were separated from their families and surroundings in Africa and that in very different ways still affects the more than 200 million of its descendants in the Americas. The designation of this day to commemorate the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade enables us not only to assess the human tragedy of the past but also to appreciate the legacy it has bequeathed to our cultures.

Colombia is firmly committed to its population of African descent, which was why we proposed establishing an International Year for People of African Descent, which the Assembly adopted by consensus under resolution 64/169. Colombia also provided support for the proclamation of an International Decade for People of African Descent, through which we hope to expand national and international efforts to root out the discrimination and inequality that many of our citizens of African origin still suffer from.

The theme of today's commemoration, "Women and slavery", gives us an opportunity to recall the ill-treatment and exploitation of slave women, but also to assess the cultural contribution they made to our societies in the areas of cuisine, care of the family and culture. It is also an opportunity to evaluate how we, the international community, have responded to women of African descent and to ask ourselves if we still have discrimination in our societies; if our societies are prepared to accept diversity and whether or not we are responding to the principles of human rights for our people of African descent. In celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration, we have seen that racial discrimination continues to be a factor in violence inflicted on women and that the world still has a very big job to do in that regard.

In order to begin to fulfil our commitment to the Decade for People of African Descent, on 21 May the Government of Colombia will launch a campaign entitled "Time to fight racism". On that day, more than 1 million public employees will participate in a virtual training course designed to raise awareness of my country's cultural and racial diversity, including the history of its population of African descent; the

cultural contributions from them that have enriched and ennobled our world view and in which women have been instrumental; and the contributions they have made to our economy, our education and to building our nation. The training course also covers the rights that the Afro population enjoys in Colombia today.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that the Government included in our new national development plan for the period 2014 to 2017 a commitment to adopting a 10-year plan aimed at ensuring recognition, justice and development for Colombia's Afro population. For 164 years now Colombia's people of African descent have been able to fully exercise their civic rights, such as the right to a democratic vote, and it is my country's wish that we should continue to strengthen every aspect of those rights in order to abolish racial discrimination, exclusion and intolerance in our social behaviour, and to encourage the empowerment of women and girls.

Ms. Al-Nussairy (Iraq) (*spoke in Arabic*): My delegation would like to endorse the statement delivered on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. We would also like to thank the Secretary-General and the President of the General Assembly, as well as all those who helped to coordinate today's event, which is a symbol of the victims of slavery that will serve to remind us all of a dark episode in human history.

Today's meeting has focused on women and slavery, and women's experiences and the ill-treatment they endured during that period. In his statement, the Secretary-General noted that while the future should be one of dignity for men and women around the globe, modern forms of slavery still exist in our world — the slavery of terrorism, such as that of Daesh, or the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, which continues to exploit men and women, treating women as chattel by selling them like consumer goods without respect or dignity. Women are treated brutally. Such practices bring to mind the atrocious forms of slavery we saw in previous centuries, and by comparison with the past we can see that what we have today may be worse, with women being exploited and forced to engage in prostitution.

The Government of Iraq is working to make every possible effort to rid itself of those armed terrorist groups, harnessing all its potential to combat terror. They are an evil that has struck not only in Iraq but all over the world. We would like to pay tribute to the efforts of other countries and the international community to help us rid our country of this evil abscess and thereby save the children, women and men of Iraq.

The Acting President: The General Assembly has thus concluded its commemorative meeting on the occasion of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

May I take it that the General Assembly decides to conclude its consideration of agenda item 116?

It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 5.45 p.m.